

THE

# HISTORIAN

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OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

August 2012

## COMING EVENTS AT LOBRANO HOUSE

The monthly luncheon meeting will be held on Thursday, August 16, 2012, at noon at the Kate Lobrano House. Guest speaker for the program will be Steve Treutel, discussing Hancock County hurricanes of the last two hundred years. *Reservations are required* and may be made by calling 467-4090. Please call *by noon on Wednesday, August 15*, to make your reservation, to help us plan seating which is limited to forty-eight people, and to apprise us of the number for whom to prepare. The price of the lunch is \$10.00.

## ANNUAL CEMETERY TOUR

Even though October is still a couple of months away, it's time to begin finalizing plans for the Hancock County Historical Society Annual Cemetery Tour. It will be held on Halloween night, Wednesday, October 31, 2012, at Cedar Rest Cemetery on Second Street. We will need volunteers to help prepare the cemetery for the tour (mark the path, etc.), to portray citizens buried there, to act as guides, and to serve at the Lobrano House.



Debris on Front Street (Beach Boulevard)—1915 Hurricane  
—from the Boardman Collection

## Hurricanes of the Past

*(The following two excerpts come from the book Hurricanes of the Mississippi Gulf Coast: Three Centuries of Destruction by Charles Sullivan, Professor Emeritus of Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College. They are reprinted here with permission of the author.)*

### The Hurricane of 1855

After loading the passengers from the noon cars of the

Pontchartrain Railway, Captain Frost of the *California* nosed away from the Milneburg Dock [in New Orleans] and headed for Mobile on Saturday, September 15, 1855. At 9:30. p. m. Frost docked at Pass Christian and the passengers for that place scurried down the long wharf amid a brisk shower and a "spanking breeze." The *California* then proceeded eastward in evermounting [sic] winds and seas.

Captain Post, commanding the packet *Creole*, at 4 p. m. that same day boarded 150 railcar passengers at Milneburg and followed in the wake of the *California*. East-southeast, gale-force winds swept the length of Mississippi Sound shortly



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OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Eddie Coleman, Editor  
Jackie Allain, PublisherPublished monthly by the  
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"TO PRESERVE THE GENERAL AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF HANCOCK COUNTY AND TO PRESERVE THE KATE LOBRANO HOUSE AND COLLECTIONS THEREIN; TO RESEARCH AND INTERPRET LIFE IN HANCOCK COUNTY; AND TO ENCOURAGE AN APPRECIATION OF AND INTEREST IN HISTORICAL PRESERVATION."

after midnight, drove the *California* to anchorage off Round Island [south of Pascagoula] and pounded the *Creole* as she wallowed in the waves toward the main wharf at Shieldsboro [Bay St. Louis]. According to a passenger:

*The Creole landed her passengers about a quarter to 1 o'clock on Sunday morning (September 16, 1855) at Bay St. Louis. The hurricane was not then at its height but was truly terrible. The sea was perfectly illuminated and ran mountains high. The safety of the passengers landing may be attributed to the phosphoric blaze from the sea.*

Twenty passengers slid down to the wharf on two planks and crawled single file along the wharf to avoid being carried off by waves breaking over it. The last man off, Deputy Postmaster John Arnold, who had refused to leave without the mail bag, barely had reached land when the whole fabric of the wharf gave way, carrying with it into the angry seas all the baggage and goods that were deposited in the pierhead warehouse. In that warehouse, too, had been an old cake woman who had refused to leave the shelter for fear of losing her little stock of baked goods. Neither she nor an old woman who slept in a hut near the wharf were seen again.

Captain Post saw the wharf splinter and decided to run for the cover of Henderson Point across the bay. The *Creole* sheltered there until 3 a. m. when the hurricane, attaining its full power, broke the anchor cables. Panic gripped the passengers as the steamboat swirled back out into the bay, headed for a crackup on the west shore. Pandemonium reigned in the mad scramble for life preservers. The captain twirled the wheel in a desperate

attempt to back the boat around. Lightning flashed and the schooner *Baltic* loomed in the darkness. The *Creole* missed colliding with the schooner by inches, but her hull thumped twice upon a sandy shoal. A father with his child in his arms had to be forcibly restrained from jumping overboard. According to one passenger, "How we succeeded in steering between this Scylla and Charybdis will always be to us one of the greatest wonders...[but] in a moment we found ourselves in deeper water."

Captain Post plowed full steam ahead northward toward Bayou Portage, with no idea of the layout of the bars, reefs, and channels at the head of the bay. But he recollected that among the passengers was a man who knew the area well—Captain Pierre Jontelle. Post sent for him and gave him the wheel. In the words of a passenger:

*[Jontelle] took charge of the steamer, and though the land was everywhere overflowed, and the bayous swollen into rivers, in the midst of the terrible hurricane, cool and collected, avoiding alike the concealed stumps and trees, and the bars and shoals, he guided the little steamer until we found a harbor.*

Even as the violence of the storm continued to build, the now-safe passengers of the *Creole* raised a subscription and presented the princely sum of \$250 to the brave pilot....

Near noon on Sunday the storm abated at Shieldsboro, and one slave owner sent a number of his blacks to the water's edge to begin salvage operations. Encouraged by the lull, Captain Post steamed out of Bayou Portage and headed down the Bay of St. Louis. Suddenly the winds struck with a vengeance from the southwest, the



opposite of its former direction. The *Creole* turned and scurried for cover again, this time into the mouth of Jourdan River. The slaves, caught on the open beach, ran to the woods and lashed themselves to trees with their salvage ropes to avoid being blown into the sea.

For three hours waves broke over the bluffs at Shieldsboro, eroding them fearfully and breaking up the shell road. The bayous behind the town backed up, cutting off retreat from that quarter. Several small dwellings collapsed and a number of larger ones shifted on their foundations, but the waters did not generally inundate the village. When the winds at last subsided, John B. Toulme, an elderly inhabitant of Shieldsboro, stated that this storm had been equaled in severity only twice in 41 years: "First in 1812 when several American gunboats went on shore while watching the British fleet, and again in 1819 when nearly every dwelling was blown down."

Both the *Creole* and the *California* remained at their respective anchorages until dawn on Monday morning, at which time both boats resumed their voyages to Mobile. The *California* arrived in that city at 9 a. m. and found it virtually undamaged. The *Creole* arrived at Mobile later in the day with reports that no bathhouses and only two wharves remained between Bay St. Louis and Pascagoula....

On Monday night the *California* anchored off Shieldsboro. In the absence of wharves, John Martin's mule carts were pressed into service to take passengers far enough into the now-calm waters for Captain Frost's small boats to receive them by lantern light. When the crew and passengers of the *California* arrived at Milneburg, they discovered that, as in the case of Mobile, New Orleans had en-

tirely escaped storm damage.

## Hurricane of 1909

The [Biloxi] *Daily Herald*  
Friday, September 17, 1909:

### STORM WARNING

*The following storm warning was issued yesterday by the United States Weather Bureau and dated New Orleans, September 16, 1909: Hurricane center apparently moving slowly toward west Cuban coast or Yucatan channel.*

By late Sunday night the eye of the storm lay off Grand Isle, and the vortex sucked northeast winds across the length of the Mississippi Coast. Foaming billows marching against these winds lost their white caps in a spray so fine it resembled steam, but in obedience to more powerful natural law, the waves came inexorably on. The Bay-Waveland Yacht Club suffered heavy damage. The rails, wires, and ties of the interurban beachfront trolley line from Biloxi to Pass Christian joined the familiar jumble of boats and timbers....

Seven schooners, late in heeding the warnings to leave Louisiana fishing grounds, approached the Bay St. Louis railroad bridge seeking passage to the sheltered coves above it. There was no response to repeated signals to open the draw, so the crewmen, unable to beat back against the wind, were forced to drop anchor. The mounting winds and waves broke the anchor cables one by one and hurled the boats against the bridge.

Later, Captain J. Christ related to a *Daily Herald* reporter what happened after the boats broke and the crews took to the bridge:

*The breakers were rolling heavily and each one would sweep*

*many times the height of a man over the bridge. There was only one possible way of getting ashore, and that was to run as far as possible between waves, and as soon as one saw a huge billow rearing its head behind him he had to duck and grab the rails for protection. In this manner the men who were refugees on the bridge managed to reach the shore, and it was a perilous undertaking, for any minute there was danger of being washed overboard.... We hardly even dared to hope that we would reach the shore alive. Some of the unfortunate men who were left on the bridge when their boats went to pieces were stranded when breaks in the structure occurred between them and the shore, and there was nothing to do but ride out the storm on the bridge.*

Adam Koscsky of the Biloxi schooner *Clementine* and two other sailors were torn from the bridge and drowned. Unable to endure the sight of men dying before his eyes, L. H. Fairchild of New Orleans took his handsome steam launch *Sweetheart* out to the bridge and saved some of the men. But he lost one of his nine-man crew in the process. Ironically, the only portion of the bridge to survive solid and intact was the draw.... The worst of it was over for the Coast by midnight. At daylight Tuesday the winds shifted southwest, and the hurricane died in a succession of squalls....

Such turn-of-the century hurricanes pointed out the need for protective walls around the entire Gulf rim....In an October 16, 1909 letter to the editor of Bay St. Louis' *The Sea Coast Echo*, Charles Sanger suggested:

*In rebuilding the beach front, I would recommend to build a concrete wall about 500 feet from the shore in about three feet of water, average tide, and to fill in the entire space in between the wall and the bluff to a level of 12 feet above*



ordinary tide.

*This filling is to be done by dredge and...the assistance of the Government in building this breakwater might be obtained. There is plenty of room for discussion. It would take years to complete this work.*

After the Hurricane of 1909, Bay St. Louis did begin building a seawall, though on a much more modest scale than that suggested by Sanger. Six years later the section rimming the shore north of the railroad bridge had been completed. The section south of the bridge had no fill behind it and thus offered no protection to the once-again rebuilt row of stilted structures teetering for a quarter-mile stretch along the downtown bayside bluff. The other Coast towns had built no protective devices at all, preferring instead to re-erect their beach structures in the time-honored fashion. And like the natives, the tourists ignored the potential for destruction.

#### SOURCE:

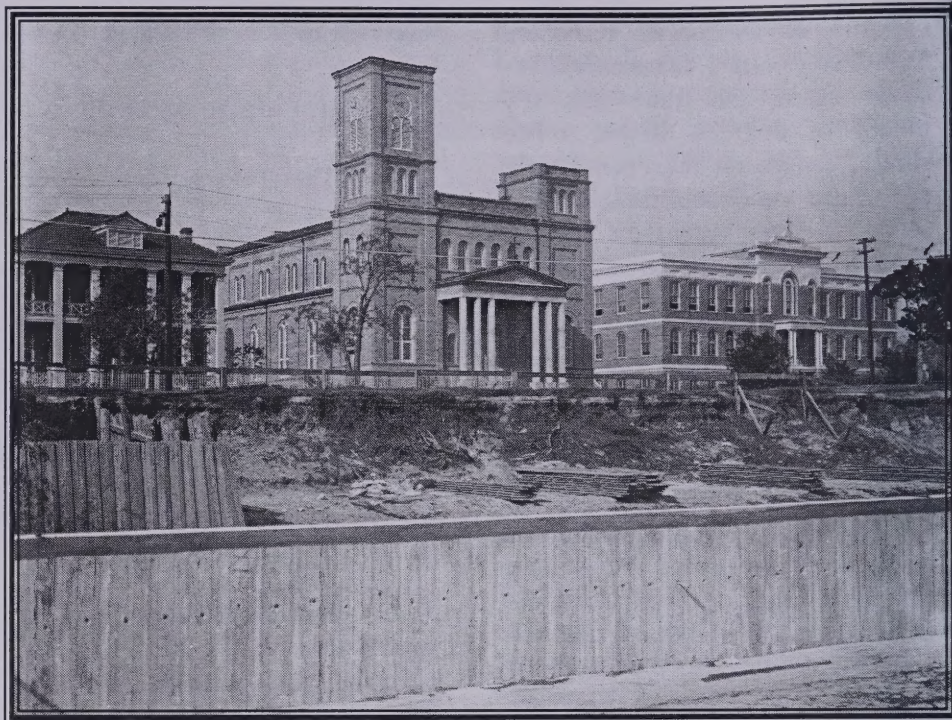
Sullivan, Charles L. *Hurricanes of the Mississippi Gulf Coast: Three Centuries of Destruction*. Perkinson, MS: Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College Press, 2011.

This book is available at the Hancock County Historical Society for \$30.00.

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The breakwater built on Front Beach after the Hurricane of 1909. Notice there is no "fill" behind the barrier. This photo was taken in 1913.

—from the Mallard Collection

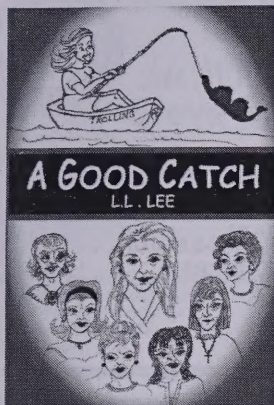


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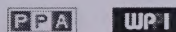
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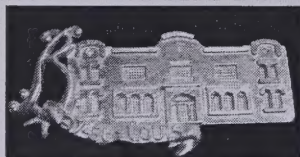
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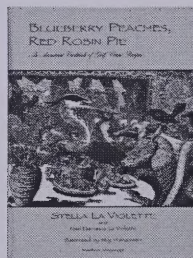
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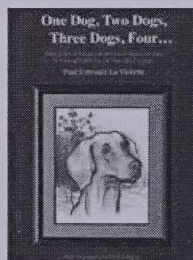


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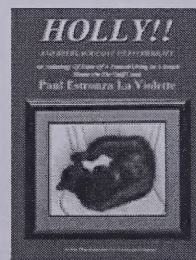
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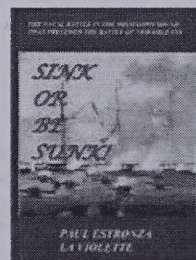
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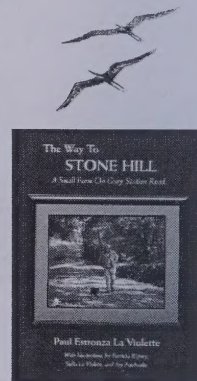
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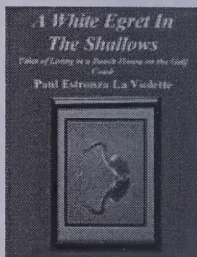
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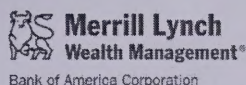
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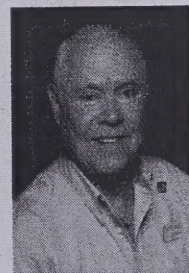
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